

NIVELLE'S VICTORY AT VERDUN A MARVEL OF COORDINATION

Thrilling Story of How the Crown Prince's Costly Work of Months Was Nullified by One Stroke—Work of Each Regiment an Epic



At the Verdun front. In the foreground, left to right—Gen. Mangin, Gen. Nivelle, President Poincaré, Gen. Dupargé.

When General Nivelle had far well to his troops at Verdun on December 16 to take up his post as commander in chief of the armies of France he carried with him in the estimation of the men who had fought for months under his orders another title—the Victor of Verdun. It was Nivelle who had definitely checked the Crown Prince and set at naught the tremendous efforts made by the Kaiser's son to force the fortress line.

After the striking victory of December 15, when the line held by the troops of the republic was pushed forward practically to where it was when the German drive was launched in February last, the new chief of the French armies thus spoke to his staff:

"The test is conclusive; our method has proved sound. Once more has the Second Army asserted in the highest degree its moral and material ascendancy over the enemy."

What was this method of which the results bespeak so highly the military value? The answer is found in the official and semi-official reports of the different phases of the French offensive at Verdun which, starting toward the end of October, has just been terminated in decisive victory. The military operations which, from October 24 to November 2, at first by a stroke of incredible fury and swiftness, later by slow, methodical progression, restored to the French the barrier forts of Verdun, ending the eight months struggle by full success, have all the proportions and the harmony of a work of art.

This mighty blow which resulted in the recapture of the forts of Douaumont and Vaux is regarded in French eyes as second only to the battle of the Marne, which broke the German invading legions in the full flush of victory.

The dispositions ordered by Gen. Nivelle, when he became commander of the Second Army with orders to break down the German offensive, could not be better illustrated than by the results of the drive undertaken against Douaumont Fort. Three divisions took part in the attack. For days the French artillery had been pounding the German positions, until the chief commander believed that the period of preparation had accomplished its purpose. Then he gave his orders to the infantry commanders.

Division, regiment, battalion, company, each had a certain, definite purpose to achieve. The general infantry attack was fixed for October 24 at 11:40 in the forenoon. Two distinct objectives were set for each division. They were to be reached at a fixed time. According to the instructions the men were to advance at a certain speed, the curtain fire of the big guns keeping pace with this advance, always just forty or fifty yards ahead of the waves.

When the morning of October 24 dawned thick fog was settling over the Verdun front. The aviators were forced to stay in their sheds. It was scarcely possible to make use of the artillery observation posts. At the hour for the attack the officers in charge of the various sections of this army got out their compasses, for they knew that they would have to lead their men to the attack just as the captain of a liner pilots his way through a fog at sea.

Precisely at 11:40 o'clock the guns opened up the barrage fire and the attacking waves were launched. Feeling their way over the shell ploughed ground, up to their hips in mud, the poilus kept at their task and always, in spite of the fog, the curtain of fire that was to protect them from the German guns and smash down resistance, was there just forty or fifty yards ahead, advancing just as the men advanced, as the orders of Nivelle had instructed them to do.

It was this extraordinary coordination of men and guns that swept the Crown Prince's army back to where the Germans stood when their drive was begun.

During the month of September and in the first days of October it seemed as if the battle of Verdun was over. It no longer held first place in the communiqué. For the readers of the Paris newspapers the army at Verdun had fulfilled its mission by having held back the invader, retaining on that front an immense number of German troops while the Allies were carrying out their plan for a general offensive in Russia, in Italy, on the Somme.

Not so for the French General Staff. The high French commanders knew that the German menace at Verdun was still strong.

On July 21 the Crown Prince, haranguing his troops, said: "Now that the Allies have begun their great offensive on the Somme, the French figure that we will have to release our grip on Verdun. They will find that they are deceiving themselves."

Gen. Nivelle realized this during the months in which he was fighting under Gen. Petain at Verdun. He knew all along that only by a strong general offensive on the Verdun front itself could the Germans be driven back. He abandoned the method which had given local victories to the French on both sides of the Meuse in favor of a series of coordinated operations covering the entire front on the eastern bank of the river.

Learning through his intelligence officers that the Crown Prince had twenty-one battalions in the first line, seven in support and ten in reserve on the Douaumont-Vaux front, Gen. Nivelle decided to employ against this force only three divisions. He sent these divisions behind the lines for a rest. The instructions he gave to his subordinate commanders were detailed to the minutest degree. A plan of Douaumont Fort was drawn so accurately that when the troops finally entered the fort each man took automatically the position which had been assigned to him in Nivelle's scheme.

"Twenty-seven months of war," wrote Gen. Nivelle on October 17, "eight months of fighting at Verdun, have affirmed and confirmed every day the superiority of the French soldier over the German soldier. Artillery of exceptional power will master the enemy artillery and open the road for the attack. The preparation in every detail is perfect, as perfect as possible."

In his final instructions to the division commanders Gen. Nivelle laid down the exact lines representing the first and second objectives of the operation to be carried out on October 24. He ordered a rest of a certain number of minutes between the arrival at the first objective and the departure for the second, this period to be occupied in consolidating the ground won.

Instead of arranging for signals to report the progress of the troops, their advance was regulated by the clock. The instructions for the guidance of troops on their arrival at their primary or secondary objective were such that there was not the slightest delay in consolidating the positions, none of the men of the divisions, the Seventh Infantry Regiment, from the Haumont quarry to Douaumont fort, which it was instructed to occupy; the Passaga Division, from the southeast and northeast angles of Douaumont fort to the Fontaines ravine; finally the Lardemelle Division, from the Fontaines ravine, between Fumin wood and Horne Valley, in front of Vaux fort.

Gen. Guyot de Salins in his order of the day said:

"To the Division, celebrated already by its brilliant exploits on the Yser, at Hill 304, at Vaux-Chapelle, at Fleury, falls the high honor of recapturing Douaumont fort. Zouaves, Moroccans, sharpshooters, Senegalese will vie in valor to inscribe a fresh victory on their glorious banners."

And Gen. Passaga, stimulating his troops by an appeal to their spirit of emulation, issued this order:

"On our left will be fighting the Division, already renowned; composed of Zouaves, Moroccans and Algerians, it is going to dispute the honor of capturing Douaumont fort. Comrades, let us realize that they can depend on us to assist them, to open the gate, to share their glory."

Thick fog covered the valleys of the Meuse and the series of heights as the troops left their lines. The officers marched compass in hand, without haste, in order, over the muddy, shell torn ground where care had to be taken not to slip into a morass or a hole. Aviators flying very low over the advancing infantry were able to keep the commanders informed of the progress of the various organizations. Telephone service was kept up with the general headquarters of the Verdun front. Thus Gen. Mangin was able to follow step by step the movements of the great attack, of which he was in immediate charge. As the minutes passed he learned that the first objective had been reached, that the French losses were insignificant, that the position was being organized, that all was ready for a further advance.

About 2:30 in the afternoon the wind swept aside the clouds, the fog lifted, and from the observation posts the watchers could see in the clear air the French troops climbing up the slopes to Douaumont, which they reached at 3 o'clock. The first objective was won.

Along the entire front messages of victory were sent back. Haumont, the Dame and Couleuvre ravines, Thiaumont, the village of Douaumont, the Callette wood, the Fausse-Cote ravine, Fumin wood, the Damloup battery, all the positions so hotly fought for throughout eight months, scenes of

Tremendous destructive power of modern artillery shown at Fort de Vaux, Verdun. Front of wall blasted away by shell fire, leaving casemates exposed. Sandbags have been piled up to close the yawning openings in a measure.

a hundred battles, covered with French and German blood, famous forever as the resting place of thousands of heroes, fell into the hands of the French at a single stroke.

Gen. Petain, General in chief of the armies of Verdun, with Gen. Nivelle and Gen. Mangin, his subordinate, were at the latter's headquarters following every detail of the gigantic work conceived by them.

The assault of the chasseurs-a-pied up the slopes of Callette wood is typical of the way in which the offensive was carried out. In his report of this phase of the attack, the French commander, filled with French pride in the achievement of his men, writes:

"It is 11:40, the hour set for the attack. The chasseurs are standing in line, bayonets fixed. Capt. D— raises his cane. The first wave is launched, speeds in solid substance; mud, exploded shells, corpses. Men sink to their armpits in the mud. Their comrades pull them out. The enemy's barrage fire begins. Too late. The waves press on. Shells fall and burst behind them. Bullets whistle out of some shelters or boyux which our guns have not reached. The 'trench sweepers' dash to the danger point. A few hand grenades deftly buried and the Boches throw up their hands with cries of 'Kamerad!'"

"Thunderstruck at our sudden appearance, unmoved by the frightful bombardment, they hand over cigarettes, cigars, tin cups, helmets, to their guardians. They have only one thought—to get out quickly from that hell. 'Verdun's back there,' says a poilu. 'You'll get there now.'"

"The advance goes on slowly, methodically. The range of the bombardment, dropping a score of yards before us, restrains the ardor of the impatient. The smoke incases, the fog is thick, we have to guide ourselves by the compass. We reach Bell ravine, we clean out the Berlin trench, prisoners flow in. The chasseurs cheer each group as it passes back. At 12:30 we reach the railway. At 12:35 the waves of attack are at the top of the northern crest of the ravine. The objective is reached. The signal is sent back: 'Objective chasseurs reached.' A wild cry of victory surges above the roar of the guns."

One German gun company fell back slightly to the right, the troops accomplished without confusion, and the various sections of the battalion had to keep at a certain fixed distance apart. To this was added the difficulties due to the fog. But the maneuver was carried out without hesitation.

The advance to the second objective was designed to bring the troops to the tower at the east of Fort Douaumont, to the northern and eastern slopes of the Fausse-Cote ravine and to the west of the Vaux pond. The line was curved slightly to the right, following the shape of the ravine itself.

The brigade on the left of the Passaga division was commanded by Gen. Ancelin, who was killed at the opening of the action. "The enthusiasm of the men is boundless," he wrote the previous evening. His place was taken by Col. Hutin, one of the leaders in the victorious campaign in the Camerons. His men had to cross the slippery crest of Fleury. They crossed it without a stop and reached their first objective, sweeping aside all resistance.

After the breathing spell allotted to them in the general order, the troops resumed their advance. The fog, which had been of real help in enabling them to reach the railroad without being the targets for a barrage fire of the Germans, began to lift and the soldiers caught glimpses of Douaumont Fort through the haze. The sight inspired them to a furious assault. These troops were, however, not to have the honor of taking the fort itself. Their task was to seize the battery east of the tower, which was soon in the hands of the French.

"It was an inspiring spectacle," says the usually dry official report of one of these infantry regiments. "The Colonel, like a rising tide, submerged the fort inside which the struggle was going on. To the east was seen the battalion of chasseurs climbing the slopes of Callette wood and the Fausse-Cote, while an interminable gray column of prisoners was coming up the glen from Chambloux toward Fleury. Each soldier, moved by the sight, looked at his neighbor, scarcely believing his eyes, and when the capture of Douaumont was confirmed it was an unfeigned moment."

Douaumont Fort was yet to be won. High up over the field of battle, of which it was the center, the fort was the choice morsel, the king of the horizon. French troops had advanced beyond it on the left. What was happening on its right?

On the right of the Guyot de Salins division was the Passaga division, which, advancing beyond the famous Bazil ravine, through which passes the Fleury-Vaux railroad, had to reach as its first objective the southern border of the Callette wood, the Fausse-Cote battery, and on the southern side of the Bazil ravine the northern and eastern slopes of the Vaux-Chapelle crest, which the Germans had occupied in September and formed a salient in the French lines.

This first objective represented a great advance, and in fact the Passaga division had the longest road to travel in its task. Moreover, on account of the existence of the salient the troops were arranged in equerre in the trenches, presenting at first a difficult maneuver. It had to be accomplished without confusion, and the various sections of the battalion had to keep at a certain fixed distance apart. To this was added the difficulties due to the fog. But the maneuver was carried out without hesitation.

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At the hour set, Nicolay's troops were marching. The mud clung to the soldiers' boots, but their gait was not slackened. The fog got thicker and thicker. An error in direction—probably due to the fact that the officer holding the compass had it close to his revolver—brought the battalion almost parallel to the Thiamaumont-Douaumont crest. There was a slight hesitation. It was of vital importance, because this battalion was the only one equipped with the necessary weapons and tools for the capture of the fort. The fog lifted and two German prisoners were seen advancing toward the French, pointing to Douaumont and crying "Kaput!"

To these colonial troops of France Douaumont seemed like a holy mountain. When the battalion arrived at the fort, when the men realized what was about to happen, seized with a sort of religious respect, they halted. An official report, that of Commandant Nicolay, refers to this extraordinary halt, perhaps unique in history, of the conqueror in front of his conquest.

"Drawing their feet out of the mud," he writes, "the soldiers stood for a moment to take advantage of their position. Not a shell was falling on their line, no infantry was there to stop their rush. The Boche barrage was intense, but the shells were falling far away. In the Vieux ravine."

"It was close to 3 o'clock. Dorey's detachment had entered the fort without striking a blow. It was in position southwest of the towers, neither firing nor being attacked."

It was impossible to adopt methodical tactics. The fighting was arranged by the commanders. The Boches were certainly on the alert. It was necessary to attack them at the earliest possible moment, before they were able to recover from the first shock.

Under the low flying French aeroplanes with their searchlights, a few swarms circling over the fort, the battalion crossed the ditch in line of columns by sections, commanders at the head, and then swarmed over the ramparts. Beyond the ramparts the men were looking into the yawning mouths of the casemates of the ground level, which were gazing at the interior court torn to pieces by our shells.

stood a tall negro waving a flag tied to the end of his rifle, while another, standing on the crest behind, sounded the charge with all the strength of his lungs."

If these were the impressions of the soldiers charged with the task of capturing the positions, the rest of the story of the conduct in the battles of Dixmude and Fleury. At the outset of the attack the regiment met with an unexpected resistance. The first French line was pounded by German heavy guns and Petain's troops had to evacuate the position. German troops entered the fort of the fort at the German line. Before the advance could be undertaken these troops had to be driven out.

This part of their task accomplished, Modat's battalion was launched against the fort. Having reached its first objective it organized the ground while Croll's battalion passed in its charge and took up a position ahead. Its instructions were to encircle the fort, right and left. The third battalion, Nicolay's, had the duty of charging against the fort itself, to enter and drive out the garrison. Croll's battalion reached the fort. Capt. Dorey, leading the first wave, not observing Nicolay's men, took the initiative in going beyond the fort and through it, instead of going around, intending to profit by the shock of the first assault on the Germans and not permit them to reorganize. Several fractions of French troops thus passed through the superstructure of the ruined fort and continued their advance beyond it. Then Nicolay's men did their task.

For more than a month Nicolay's battalion knew it had been selected for this mission. The men thought of nothing else. The battalion occupied a unique position in the army of Verdun because of this choice, and officers and men felt it. Each man knew that much was expected of him, but he realized that he was a cog in the great wheel. There was only one will, the desire to fulfill the task entrusted to the battalion.

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Before this chaos which had been a great fort, a symbol of will and strength, miraculously recovered, the men looked into each other's eyes. The battalion chief, who had halted at the bottom of the ditch to see his men pass, regained his position at the head of the troops and, while paying homage to the sacred and unforgettable scene before him, gave the order to attack the guns which were still belching fire before the advancing waves.

The resistance of the eastern of the fort did not last long. The superstructure and the exterior works were stormed. Grenadiers worked their way through all the passages of the work, and the fort was firmly in the hands of the French before the sun went down.

On the following day Gen. Nivelle, commanding the army of Verdun, addressed to the troops of Gen. Mangin this order of the day:

"Officers, sub-officers and soldiers of the Mangin group—in a few hours of a magnificent action you have seen from your powerful enemy at a single blow the ground covered with obstacles and fortresses northeast of Verdun which it had taken him eight months to occupy, little by little, at the cost of desperate efforts and considerable sacrifices."

suited in the recapture of Douaumont Fort, the Lardemelle division, on the extreme right of the attacking forces, had to be content with reaching its first objective in front of Fort Vaux. It had carried the Damloup battery, the Sallière and the Litz Depot, but there were greater obstacles in the way which necessitated a heavier artillery preparation than had been undertaken.

These obstacles were swept aside, however, little by little, between October 24 and November 1, when Andlauer's division took up the positions won by Lardemelle's men. The latter were then relieved and the task of assaulting Fort Vaux was entrusted to the fresh troops.

A German officer, captured on October 24, was stupefied for a moment when he learned that the French had captured Douaumont. He recovered his equanimity, however, and remarked:

"You have taken Douaumont, but you will never take Vaux."

Besieged by the Germans on March 9 in the first drive of the Crown Prince, Fort Vaux had held out until June 7. It resisted all efforts of the Germans for three months, and even when the besiegers were in immense strength on three sides of the place Commandant Raynal and his heroic garrison held out for six more days. Judging by the efforts put forth by the Germans to capture this position it represented for them an objective of the first importance in the advance against Verdun. It dominated the Woivre Forest and enabled the Germans, once they were in possession of the fort, to utilize the Bazil, Fumin and Horne ravines to make the movements of troops. Its guns covered Tannous and Souville forts.

While the buildings and works actually comprising the Vaux fort were almost in ruins from the French bombardment, the Germans had organized a tremendously strong line of defense in advance of the position. In the first line was a trench extending from the Nez de Souville to the southern slopes of the Goyette Valley. About half a mile behind this line was a second line starting from the opening of the Fontaines ravine and extending to the village of Damloup. Between these lines was a third series of non-continuous trenches, forming points of support. Moreover, every shell hole and crater was organized into a field work. The main trenches were linked by "boyaux."

The Lardemelle division was composed of seasoned troops, formed for the most part of men from the Dauphine, Savoy and Buzey, who were acquainted with the ground through having fought at a point a short distance from the front during the months of September and the beginning of October. When the great offensive was launched on October 24 these troops displayed the same ardor and will as their comrades of the divisions on their left.

They encountered a much more stubborn resistance, however. Every spot of ground they won became immediately the objective of a serious counter attack.

"Led by a patrol," says an official report, "the section advanced on the right and in spite of a galling fire reached a point a short distance from the shelter (German). Our men, led by their commander, threw themselves boldly against the position and hurled grenades at the occupants. A wounded officer surrendered, and, pointing to six men who were on their feet, said: 'Gentlemen, there is my company; the rest are dead.' This gesture demonstrated the violence of the resistance we met with."

The first line of trenches guarding Fort Vaux was taken by the French only in the evening of October 25. The struggle was kept up for two days against a point a short distance from the shelter (German). Our men, led by their commander, threw themselves boldly against the position and hurled grenades at the occupants. A wounded officer surrendered, and, pointing to six men who were on their feet, said: 'Gentlemen, there is my company; the rest are dead.' This gesture demonstrated the violence of the resistance we met with."

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